THE CASE-BOOK OF A PRIVATE DETECTIVE

Inside History of the Methods Employed in Criminal Investigation, Embracing True Narratives of Interesting Cases by a Former Operative of the William J. Burns Detective Agency.

BY DAVID CORNELL

12—A MADE TO ORDER BANK BURGLARY

How a Vault and a Reputation Were Shattered by Too Much Dynamite

(Copyright, 1912, by International Press Bureau.)

(Editor's Note:—In order that no annoyance may accrue through the publication of these narratives to persons involved therein, other names and places have in many instances been substituted for the real ones.)

"The Welldon Community bank, of Welldon, N. Y., was robbed by safe-blowers last night. Nitroglycerin was used to open the bank vault, with disastrous results to one of the robbers, who was blown to pieces by the explosion. His confederates successfully looted the bank and obtained $85,000 in cash."

This little item carried by the various New York papers was the genesis of my connection with the great Welldon Community bank robbery. A few hours after the papers carrying the news were on the street I was on my way to Welldon, ordered by the Burns agency to investigate the case as a representative of the National Bankers' Protective association.

As the reader probably is not familiar with the Welldon community it is necessary to delay my story a trifle in order that the situation may be made more clear. This community is one of several of the sort that may be found in southern New York and northern Pennsylvania. It was founded about 1840 by an Englishman named Welldon, who was in his own way a seeker after a modern Utopia. Welldon believed that our whole system of living in cities, crowded and uncomfortable, or in country districts, isolated and lonesome, was all wrong. He believed that the small community, fifty families, for instance, gathered around a common center, and yet not gathered so closely together as to make an actual town, was the ideal, as well as the practical way, for mankind to dwell. He had made something of a fortune in the mill business in England. Unable to put into practice in that country his novel idea, he came to America and, after considerable searching, fixed upon the rich farming valley in southern New York as the spot most favorable for the location of the Welldon community. There he brought together about thirty families, bringing most of them from his native land, England. He established a co-operative store, a blacksmith shop, a school, a church, a mill, in fact, everything needed to supply the welfare of an agricultural community—including the Welldon Community bank. This bank, while it was owned and patronized mainly by the people of the community, was chartered and managed as any small country bank would be. Welldon had conducted its affairs himself at first. At his death it had passed to his son so far as management was concerned, though the title remained in the community. Welldon's son had continued the banking business as successfully as his father had done before him, and the bank was as prosperous and sound as a small bank possibly could be. It had never become a power, but on the other hand, it had never been in trouble once during its whole existence.

Welldon's son had died a few years before the robbery occurred, and the management thereupon had passed into the hands of Giles, the cashier. He had done fully as well by the bank as the Welldons had, and the community had trusted its money to the bank's care as implicitly as ever. The bank had proved time and again that it was panic-proof; but it wasn't burglar-proof. After over sixty-five years of successful operation it had been cleaned out by the conventional accident of safe-blowing. Altogether it was a remarkable situation.

I found the little place in the greatest stir of its history when I alighted from the accommodation train that carried me from the nearest city up the spur to Welldon community. There wasn't much of a town at Welldon, only a few stores, offices, warehouses and houses strung along the road in the center of the farms of the valley. The bank was a neat, old gray-stone building that occupied a position of honor in the middle of it all. It was a compact, sturdy looking building, obviously built with a view to guarding as well as possible whatever might be kept inside. Around the building were gathered most of the people of the community. The rest of them were buzzing around the undertaker's shop across the road, where the body of the slain safe-blower lay for the present. The county sheriff and the coroner were doing their respective duties in assertive fashion, and the people had to content themselves with standing and looking at the outsides of the buildings containing the objects that had aroused their curiosity. They were the most shocked and horror-stricken group that I had seen for a long time. It was the first real crime of any importance that had ever been committed in the valley within the memory of the oldest inhabitant, and the community was so awed by the shock of it that there was scarcely a thought left in the whole crowd.

I went to the bank first and my card let me in past the sheriff's deputy. I was received by Mr. Giles, the president of the bank, and the board of directors, who were assembled in the banking room. They were glad to see me. This was something altogether out of their line, and they were relieved to have some one arrive on whom they could unload the burden of their worry.

"I had feared for years that it was coming," said Giles. "Every night for the last twenty years that I have locked up that old-fashioned vault I have said to myself: 'What would happen if a safe-blower knew what a weak door stands between this bank's money and a robber?' I have recommended time after time the installation of new vaults, but you gentlemen of the directorate have seen fit to believe that economy should continue to be our watchword. Far be it from me to pretend to criticize, but there might be a different tale to tell this morning if there had been a modern vault in this bank."

"Oh, well," said one of the directors, "I suppose these safe-blowers could get into any kind of a safe, couldn't they, Mr. Cornell?"

"Some of them can," I replied. "It depends on their skill. Suppose we take a look at the safe."

Giles promptly led us into the rear room, where the vault was located. I never have seen a vault or safe that had been used more roughly than the one that now was before my eyes. In the language of the profession, it had been "all shot to pieces." The door had been cracked and torn and twisted and flung across the room. Pieces of bolts, bars and iron were lying all over. It was impossible to tell what kind of a door it had been that locked in the Welldon community's money, so shattered was it. An enormous amount of horse blankets had been used to muffle the sound of the explosion.

"A big charge," I said; "a desperately big charge. They must have wanted to make sure of blowing her open and didn't fear to make a noise. Please leave everything just as it is and let us step across and look at the man who got caught in the explosion."

We—Mr. Giles, the directors and myself—went over to the undertaking shop where the dead bandit lay. I had hoped to recognize him as some listed yeggman, though my acquaintance with that class was limited; but I was disappointed. His face had been blown so thoroughly to pieces in the explosion that it was impossible for anyone not familiar with his smallest characteristics to make out who he might have been. He was dressed a little better than the average yeggman, for there was the remnant of a clean cuff on one of his wrists, but this was all that I could make out in a cursory examination.

"I'll be back later," I told the man in charge. Then I told Giles that I would like to hear the whole story of the affair.

He led the way back to his office in the bank building and told the story in a careful, intelligent way. There was nothing remarkable in the story. He had been called down to the bank at 6:30 that morning by a workingman who, while passing to his work, had seen that the front door of the bank building was unlocked. He had gone in at once, in company with the workman. He had found the door between the banking room and the vault room locked, as usual. He had opened the door and had found the dead burglar and the looted safe, much as we had seen the room. Eighty-five thousand dollars in large bank notes had been taken. Some hundreds of dollars' worth of smaller bills and about a thousand dollars' worth of silver had not been touched. Nobody had been found who had heard the explosion, and there was absolutely no trace of the robbers.

That was Giles' story. It was told in precise, clerical fashion, greatly in contrast to the story of the sheriff, who, when he was called in, rambled about bloodhounds and posses and made a fool of himself trying to appear "wise" before a city detective.

"You locked up the vault last night, did you, Mr. Giles?" I asked.

"Yes sir," he answered.

"And this money was all in there when you locked it up?"

"Yes, of course."

I thanked him and said: "Now will you kindly let me go over the vault again alone? I must study it carefully in order to make out an intelligent report."

He acquiesced readily and I went in the room and shut myself in with the shattered vault.

I had been impressed with my first glance by the apparently enormous charge of explosive that had been used in the robbery. So terrible had the wreckage been that it seemed impossible to me that any living man could have been in that room and survived after the "soup" had scattered the fragments of that door around. The room was so narrow that it must have been like standing before a mortar loaded with scrap iron. The horse blankets were torn to shreds. I said to myself: "A bungler's job," and went out and telegraphed for an expert on explosives, for the expert of the firm that made the safe, and for Durango and Mahaffey, two of our men who knew most of the big yeggs in the country by sight. I locked and sealed the vault room, so it could not be tampered with.

When Mehaffey came he took one look at the dead yegg, lifted his hands and examined the back of them and found some tattoo marks and said: "Sailor Benny, as I'm alive! How did he ever get so far from Omaha? And how did he ever put in too much soup? He was the prince of them all in knowing just how much it took to loosen a door. By glory! Cornell, there's something queer about this Benny never overloaded in his life."

The dynamite expert and the safe man came in on the next train and the three of us entered the vault room of the bank together. The dynamite man took one look around and said: "Shut the door."

The safe man obeyed and, to make sure, I hung my coat over the keyhole.

"My gad!" said the safe man, almost crying, "It isn't possible. No safe of ours could be blown up in that fashion. Say, nobody ever could blow one of our safes up in that fashion—not even one of these old ones."

"Yes," said the dynamite man, "I've done it myself."

"How?"

"On a test," said the other. "By loading the safe on the inside and then locking the door."

We looked at one another.

"That is what was done here, isn't it?" I said.

"Absolutely," said the dynamite man.

I sent for Mehaffey and told him what had been said.

"Then the job never was of Sailor Benny's doing," said he instantly. "Good gad, man! The load must have been put in by the man who locked the door. And then how did Benny come to be killed cracking the door?"

The dynamite man and the safe man prepared to withdraw.

"I guess the case is all up to you, Mr. Cornell," they said. "It looks like work for a 'tec."

They went away and Mehaffey and I sat down to theorize behind the locked door.

"Cornell," said Mehaffey, "there is this about this job: Somebody had been in on it before Sailor Benny got to it. Somebody had stuck a load in there back of that door, and whoever it was must have been the man who closed the vault and fixed the combination. Then Benny comes along with his pal and gets busy. Benny puts in his little charge, just a little soup poured in the cracks to loosen that old door. His pal is in the other room, doing lookout. Benny turns loose his charge—and, bang! goes the big one that's inside. Naturally Benny is knocked stiff. His pal comes in, sees what has happened, gets the money and beats it in a hurry. Isn't that the way you size it up?"

"Not quite," I said. "Why did that big load happen to be on the inside the night that Benny came to blow the crib? Didn't the man who put it there know that Benny was coming? And if he did know—how did he come to know? Why did he know that? And if he knew—which he certainly did—why did he leave it there, knowing—as he certainly must have—that it would blow Benny to pieces as sure as he ever turned loose his charge? And if he knew all this—this man—which he did—why did he do it? Why did he want Benny killed there in front of the safe? Why did he do that?"

Mehaffey shook his head.

"She's a bad case, Cornell," he said.

"Yes," I said, "because the man who put that soup in there to go off when Benny came must have had something to hide, and this was the way he took to hide it. Mehaffey," I said, suddenly, "you and Durango both know all about Benny's old haunts out in Omaha. Better run out there right away and see if you can find why Benny came east."

"Ye-es," said he, slowly. "That's about the way she will work out. Why did Benny come east? Who got him to come? That's the question that's to be answered. Durango stars in that piece; he used to work in Omaha and knows Benny's girl."

When we came out of the vault room I said to the president:

"Well, Mr. Giles, we have done about all we can do here. What we've got to do now is to try to look for this dead robber's confederate, the man who got the money. We will do our best, but I assure you it will be a hard task to find him."

"I fear so, Mr. Cornell," said Giles. "But you people are very capable, I understand."

"We never have fallen down on a case yet," I said as we left him.

I suspect that Durango at one time or another had been on the other side of the fence, for his knowledge of criminals, their hang-outs, their manners and their associates in this country was something too intimate to have been picked up as a detective. Durango could at any time go to any city in the country, go straight to the criminal quarter and be accepted as one of the bunch without the slightest suspicion. This was his sole qualification as a detective, however, so he was valuable only at infrequent intervals. In this case he was, as Mehaffey put it, the star. The pair of them blew into Omaha on the beams of a box car, attired in proper hobo clothing. They went to a saloon kept by an ex-convict near the stock yards—a crooks' nest—and within a few hours they were associating with some of Durango's old friends in a back room upstairs. They worked for two days and then sent me this bulletin:

"Sailor Benny was flush with money for weeks before starting to do Welldon job. Must have been paid in advance to do it."

Next day came another wire:

"Have found Benny's wife. From her got information that Benny was originally a Welldon boy. He used to get money from there occasionally. Perhaps you can connect up on this."

And the third day:

"Benny's wife says Benny went to Welldon in answer to wire saying just 'Come.' She doesn't know where wire came from."

I wired back:

"If possible send me sample of writing from person remitting him money from Welldon."

And that—the result of that wire—settled the Welldon bank robbery.

On the tenth day of my stay in Welldon, just after he had pulled down the curtains and closed the bank for the day, I placed Mr. Giles, the president, under arrest.

"Arrest?" he cried. "Me? Under arrest? What does this mean, Mr. Cornell?"

"Just what it sounds like, Mr. Giles," I said. "I am sorry, but there is nothing for me to do but place you under arrest for robbing the Welldon Community bank of $85,000."

"Great Scott!" he said. "Do you know what you are talking about? Are you crazy?"

"I hope not," I said. "Let me tell you what I have discovered since I came to Welldon: I discovered that you have been an inveterate Wall street gambler for the last ten years. It wasn't hard to do that; the brokers keep a list of every out-of-town trader they do business with. You had been trading under the name of Travers, but your broker knew who you were. He had looked you up. You were fairly lucky for an outsider until last June. Then your losses began to pile up steadily. A month ago you owed $85,000, and had to make it good or be exposed. You did make it good. You did make it good—out of that vault back there.

"You hoped to cover that loan you made yourself so that nobody ever would be the wiser for it. You hoped to put it back; they all do. But, like most of them in the same fix, you found that you couldn't do it. Then you began to look around for some means of covering up your crime. In your dilemma you thought of a certain man who had left this town as a boy, who had gone to the bad, and whom you had helped—I give you credit for a good heart, Giles—at various intervals when he needed it. You thought of him. You got him to come here. You told him what you wanted done; you wanted the safe blown and robbed. You promised that you would give him half of the big sum that you said was inside—and which should have been inside.

"But you knew you were playing with fire in taking this criminal in as your confederate in so dastardly a crime as robbing your own bank. You needed to have that safe blown—to have it appear that the bank had been looted of $85,000—but you couldn't afford to let a criminal live and know your secret. So you loaded that vault before you locked it the evening before the robbery. You did that—only you could have done it—because you admitted that you locked the vault up for the night.

"You put that big charge of explosive back of the door. Your man—Sailor Benny, the yeggman—came as you had requested. He went to work in workmanlike fashion and shot a respectable charge in the cracks of the door. His explosion turned loose the terrific load you had prepared for him. The door was blown to pieces, so was the yeggman, and you woke up in the morning and felt you were safe once more. Isn't that about the truth of the affair, Mr. Giles?"

"Proof?" he said, sneering. "You have proofs to substantiate this pretty little story?"

I merely lifted my hand from the table so he could see underneath what Durango had sent me from Omaha. It was an old envelope which Durango had got from Benny's wife, and in which Benny once had got money from Welldon.

Giles took one swift look at the handwriting and began to gasp like a fish. The writing was his own.

He confessed that night to the board of directors and pleaded for mercy. But those old, hard working farmers were made of tough stuff. They refused his plea and Giles went to Sing Sing under a heavy sentence.

"That is what was done here, isn't it?" I said.

KILLED BY BLANK CARTRIDGE

Peculiar Fatality That Accompanied Military Maneuvers Undertaken by French Troops.

A strange and sad accident occurred in the course of drill manauvers at Montreuil-sous-Bois, in the suburbs of Paris, France, where a soldier was killed by a blank cartridge discharged at him by a fellow-soldier. A company of the Thirty-first regiment was taken out to Montreuil for maneuvers. At three o'clock in the afternoon the lieutenant in command decided to order a sham attack on a fort, which his soldiers were to storm. Some of the soldiers were posted as sentries, and the others were told that in storming the imaginary fort they were to try specially to take the sentries prisoners, but a formal order was given to the soldiers that they were not to load their rifles. In spite of this a shot was suddenly heard, and a soldier fell with a groan. He was a young recruit called Laurent, and near him stood another soldier who had acted as sentry and was completely dumfounded by what had happened. Either he did not know that there was a cartridge in the weapon or he fired thinking that it was only part of the sham fighting. Laurent was taken to the hospital at Begin, and soon afterwards expired. He had been killed by the packing of the blank cartridge, which, being fired within only a yard or two of him, acted like a bullet. The unfortunate soldier was the eldest son of a widow, who has three smaller children to bring up.

Cloth Made of Banana Fiber.

The manufacture of cloth from banana fiber promises to become a great industry in the far east, particularly in India. The process of manufacture is very simple. One year old plants are selected and the stalk is unrolled and steamed over caldrons of boiling water till soft. It is a simple matter then to remove the green outer skin by passing strips of the stalk through an instrument provided with a couple of blunt blades, which act as scrapers. The fiber thus obtained is placed in cloth and pounded in order to drive out excess moisture and is next cleaned and twisted into yarn for weaving. Banana cloth is said to be eminently suitable for tropical wear and is very durable. At present the price would seem to be almost prohibitive, as a roll of banana cloth, five yards long and one yard wide, sells for about $5.70. As this enterprise is a brand new one, high prices are to be expected; but they are sure to right themselves as the demand for this kind of cloth grows, and the supply endeavors to keep pace with it.

Reconciliation.

Ben Ali Haggan is the man about whom one of the most delightful little painting romances was once told. It was in connection with his portrait of Mary Garden as Thais, which was exhibited in a Fifth avenue window. There, the story goes, his grandfather, James J. B. Haggan, seeing the picture in the window, was so delighted with it that he wished to buy it immediately, and offered $10,000 for it, not knowing the artist was his own grandson, who had been spurned on account of his artistic tendencies. The offer was made through Miss Garden, and eventually raised to $25,000. Then the artist and the cruel grandsire were reconciled on the spot, the artist meanwhile accepting the $25,000 check with a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger expression. It was a very nice story, but there was only one trouble with it—it was not true in any particular.

Fear Sparks From Telephone.

It is possible to ignite by sparks from a telephone. Hence in all German gas works the telephone bells are covered with wire gauze.

USEFUL MICROBE OF SPRING

French Scientist's Explanation Far from Poetic, but Doubtless It Is the Truth.

Spring is interesting to others besides poets and lovers. Scientific men have been studying its why and its how and they now tell us that it is due to something widely different from the warming rays of the sun. M. Muentz, in an address before the Academy of Sciences in Paris the other day, asserted that spring was due to microbes.

When the days grow longer these microbes become extraordinarily active and they set up what M. Muentz calls an excessive nitrification, without which the earth would remain sterile and the sap would not flow in plants. This activity, he says, has nothing to do with the temperature, but is due solely to the hereditary tendency of these microbes to become active at this time of the year.

And it is due to a microbe that the young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

The Common Sense of It.

The really old-fashioned educational system upon which ours is founded had a vigorous common sense about it. School ended for the boy at 14 or 15, the freedom of college began at once, and the boy must stand on his own feet. An intellectual standard of a comparatively uniform type was demanded of college graduates. Roughly speaking there was, outside of mathematics and the limited number of sciences then studied, only one system of thought of any importance to be learned, and this involved a real knowledge of Latin and English literature. To be without this was to be in a sense unfit. The college provided the simple and direct means of mastering this system; and young men set themselves to the task of acquiring it. The pressure of real life, therefore, was felt throughout the system, and the spirit of earnestness permeated education. In other words, the use of one's studies was not lost sight of as now.—Atlantic Monthly.

Value of Good Manners.

The woman who amounts to anything these days must have good manners. There are exceptions, but the woman who would make friends for herself or business for her firm will have a lot easier time and be more successful if she has acquired personal charm. An unfortunate manner neutralizes the good a woman does. The capable woman need not grow slack in her work because she leads, not drives; because she is soft of voice, suave of tongue, kindly of heart, and gracious to all. The reason most of the women are otherwise than suave is that the turmoil of life gets the upper hand. They let their nerves go and good breeding follows.